

'Puzzling' Moments in the Field: Dilemmas on Positionality and Self-Reflexivity

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‘Puzzling’ Moments in the Field: Dilemmas on Positionality and Self-Reflexivity

Sezer İdil Göğüş

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Dilemmas on Positionality and Self-Reflexivity

Sezer İdil Göğüş

In April 2016, I flew to Istanbul in order to conduct the first part of field research for my dissertation. My research focused on political socialisation practices amongst the Justice and Development Party (AKP) members, in several districts and small towns¹ I aimed to analyse and understand the support for the AKP in spite of a growing critique against their party politics, both at home and abroad. The party’s growing authoritarian tendencies and disregard of fundamental human rights in Turkey sparked this critique, culminating with the 2013 Gezi Protests. Even though the critique against the AKP and Erdoğan has been growing, the party received a majority of the votes in previous elections.² I wanted to understand the perspective of these AKP members and to answer questions such as: why is the AKP still so attractive; and why do some people choose to work for the AKP? Therefore, I decided to spend time in party offices, participate in party events, and also conduct interviews with current and former members. Overall, I spent two months in different cities (Istanbul, Ankara, Muğla, Rize)³; and tried to comprehend the possibilities and limitations of gaining access whilst doing fieldwork.

In my field journal, there are two main topics that I frequently refer to: dilemmas on my positionality as a researcher; and personal security in the field. The security issue was a concern due to the bombings by Islamic State (IS) and armed Kurdish groups⁴ that had occurred in Turkey before my arrival and also during my visit⁵. However, the limits of my embeddedness and access to the field kept me quite preoccupied as well: for one, it was my first direct encounter with a group that I do not share political views with; and secondly, due to the highly polarised political environment in Turkey, I was questioning my positionality as a Turkish citizen.

Since our previous experiences shape how we feel about situations into which we enter (Bauman and May 2001, 19; Goffman 1959), my in-field situatedness (Basberg Neumann and Neumann 2015) was also linked with my own personal and political views, and situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) about the group that I aimed to understand. Factors that form researcher’s identity such as gender, age, education, or ethnicity, can influence accessing the field (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 67). However, it does not mean that such factors are a ‘universal key to open all doors’

1 Due to the political situation after the June 2016 attempted coup in Turkey, I had to change my dissertation project. Currently, I am working on Turkish diaspora politics and political subjectivities in Germany.

2 In the 2015 parliamentary elections, the AKP gained 49,50 % of the votes and reached an absolute majority in the parliament. In 2018, the party received 42,56 % of the votes (Daily Sabah 2018).

3 These cities have different demographics and historical backgrounds: Istanbul is historically a multicultural city; Ankara is the capital of modern Turkey; Muğla is in the Western part of Turkey and, since the establishment of Turkish Republic in 1923, the residents predominantly vote for Atatürk’s secular Kemalist party CHP; and Rize is located in the northeast coast of Turkey, it is the hometown of Erdoğan’s family and the majority of residents are passionately pro-Erdoğan.

4 For more information and a timeline on attacks please see: Euronews (2016): Timeline of terrorism in Turkey, in: <https://www.euronews.com/2016/01/12/timeline-of-terrorism-in-turkey> (accessed on 31 May 2019).

5 Interestingly, one of the first sentences in my journal is about where I should go or not go and how I could avoid a possible bomb attack: “The only issue that we talk is security. I am advised that I should not go to crowded places or use public transportation. The European side of Istanbul is perceived as dangerous, and one of the centres on the Asian side is also listed as one of the places where a bomb attack can occur. On the websites of American and Israeli Consulates in Istanbul, Turkey is listed as one of the dangerous countries for travelling. Besides all this fear, life is still going on” (Note from field journal, 3 April 2016).

(Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 67) for the researcher; they are rather conditional. Indeed, they can sometimes open doors, and other times shut doors (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 67).⁶

In line with this conditionality, it is important to reflect on such issues. Indeed, self-reflexivity has become an essential part of ethnographic research. It is a beacon showing the reasons and logic as to how 'the other' is represented by the researcher.⁷ In other words, they show 'how our social positions may influence our knowledge claims' (Lichterman 2017, 36). Most importantly, reflexivity guides the reader and shows 'our recognition that knowledge claims are conditioned and partial' (Lichterman 2017, 36).

Under these considerations, and along with my fears and reservations, I evaluated my positionality as a researcher, noting the assumptions of my role, position and identity, which were reflected by the people whom I met in the field and their way of talking to me. In turn, it enabled me to question various notions such as bi-culturality, gender roles, political views, and possibilities and limits of embeddedness, and their influence on research.

Therefore, this paper aims to show three different ethnographic vignettes from my fieldwork, which evoked concerns on 'failure'. However, I prefer to define them as 'puzzling' moments that serve as a lynchpin for self-reflexivity. I suggest that these puzzling moments are riddles to solve – as the term suggests – and indeed are certainly challenging. They are also full of possibilities, which enable the researcher to scrutinise where ethnographic knowledge claims are coming from.

Native or Foreign?

In one of the small towns in Muğla, I had to walk around the same street until I found the AKP office. It is a small holiday town which, during summer, is overcrowded yet in winter becomes deserted. The town is located in the Aegean Region of Turkey, which is historically Kemalist,⁸ and predominantly votes for the Republican People's Party (CHP) against the AKP. Therefore, I was not surprised to see that the AKP office was not really in the city centre and looks a little bit hidden in a very old and ragged building.

There I had the chance to talk not only with the women but also men who are active in party politics⁹. Unlike other offices that I had visited in Istanbul, the common area was not separated between the sexes; instead, they were eating lunch, drinking tea and coffee, or organising events together. On the first day I spent at the office, I talked with several people of various age ranges: a young woman in her early 20s; several women in their 40s and 50s; and three men in their 50s as well. Many of them were quite open to explaining their views on the AKP and why they chose to work for the party. However, I was also asked by some party members to show an official document from my university to prove that I was really writing a dissertation.

Interestingly, an elderly couple in the group, who lived for some years in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, and who possess both German and Turkish citizenship, reacted significantly positive to the fact I was coming from Germany. Some weeks later, when I started to work on the data I

6 For various discussions on such issues, please see (Ortbals and Rincker 2009).

7 See 'Writing culture' debate: Clifford & Marcus (1986) and Abu-Lughod (1991).

8 Kemalism is the ideology that follows the reforms of Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the Turkish Republic, and is affiliated with six fundamental principles: republicanism, statism, populism, laicism, nationalism and reformism. Tunçay explains that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk defined these principles in order to prevent social despotism among the conservative Turkish-Muslim population and replaced it with political despotism (Tunçay 2015).

9 Interestingly, in other offices, I was directly sent to the women's branch of the party, and I could only mostly talk with women who worked in the office.

collected in the aftermath of this field research period, I realised something else: I saw myself as somebody ‘from’ Germany, not only ‘living temporarily’ in Germany. Regarding this situation I commented in my journal: ‘He [the husband] was quite interested in my research and asked me if I could send him my thesis afterwards because he would like to learn from my results. Interestingly, he was using German words in his sentences. I think it was some sort of reference to his background in Germany; and therefore, he found me more likeable because I am coming from Germany. I could tell that there was another kind of connection between me and him. Or I can say that I assumed we built trust faster.’¹⁰

This realisation about my own identity made me think about what are the advantages and disadvantages of being a ‘native’, ‘halfie’, and ‘foreign’ researcher. Ohnuki-Tierney states that native anthropologists have a ‘more advantageous position in understanding the emotive dimensions of behaviour’ (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984, 584). Indeed, native anthropologists might have intimate or in-depth knowledge about the interlocutors’ daily routines and are likely to be familiar with their culture. However, this can mean that the researcher might not be as objective or impartial as non-native anthropologists, subconsciously at least. Similar to being native, being halfie or bicultural also implies an insider perspective. Abu-Lughod states that halfies or biculturals¹¹ can position themselves in two communities (or maybe even more); therefore, they manage to see the whole picture (Abu-Lughod 1991). It might be a desirable skill in order to be objective, but it could also create a representation problem about the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ in the research: Are you a native or foreigner? In my case, the surprising issue was the realisation of the shift from being native to a foreigner and becoming bicultural. Before I stepped into the field, I assumed that I was a researcher from Turkey who currently resides and works in Germany but still has an insider perspective. But through interactions with these people, I became a hybrid: a Turkish-German, who probably only knows Turkey and its history from a specific point of view. Following that, I received explanations from my interlocutors about their perspective on Turkish history in order to be able to understand the different dimensions of the history of the country better. Interestingly, this perception of my interlocutors resonated subconsciously in my field notes, as noted above.

Some Kind of Team Member?

The head of the women’s branch in Muğla invited me to an informal coffee meeting with the other active female members of the party. In this small group setting, I was able to grasp their views on the party and why they think their ‘public service can only do well for Turkey’s future.’¹² After two hours of talking, and when I thought it was time to leave, I received an interesting request from one of the women there. They wanted to take a photo with me and put it online on the party webpage. I sensed that they were quite sure about my support for the AKP and believed that possible collaboration in the future would also be of interest to me; because I had approached them and showed interest in getting to know them, I must, therefore, have been a party supporter. Being photographed was a big dilemma for me in two respects: first, I did not want to reject their request and break the possible trust I was trying to build; secondly, I did not want to have any kind of connection to the party, which I do not support, but instead criticise. I refused the request and argued vaguely that it might harm my objectivity as a researcher. That was the turning point for our relationship. I wondered whether they were disappointed and/or if they started to see me not as one of them but as some other: ‘They also wanted to know my view on the issues about which

¹⁰ Note from my field journal, 22 April 2016.

¹¹ Abu-Lughod defines halfies as “people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage” (Abu-Lughod 1991, 466).

¹² Interview with Women Branch Muğla, 28 April 2016.

we were talking: on the AKP, the future of Turkey, the success of the AKP.’ The head of the women’s branch, Songül, said ‘It is now our turn, we will ask you questions.’¹³ They wanted to hear more about my own political views and my family’s political background. It was, for me, a very interesting situation because throughout my field research I realised that being from Turkey and doing research in Turkey puts me in a confusing and challenging position: ‘In a way, I am not 100% unprejudiced, and my interview partners are not able to perceive me as 100% unprejudiced [...] They were curious about my background and whether they can relate to me.’¹⁴ Reiter-Theil states that such research should be conducted as ‘some kind of team member’ (Reiter-Theil 2004, 23 in Lewis and Russell 2011, 400). However, in such highly politically charged research, it is not always possible to be a team member or entirely embedded, because the research can be quite personal, and indeed separating yourself from the research is more difficult for native/halfie researchers than non-native ones. This case forced me to question my position in the field as a researcher and my political identity as a Turkish citizen.

Unintended Impressions

After the three-hour journey from Istanbul city centre, I arrived in an area where big skyscrapers and business towers are standing next to textile factories and a modest, conservative, and slightly poor-looking neighbourhood. The bus ride showed me another face of Istanbul, which I knew of but had not seen very closely before. The neighbourhood called Başakşehir was a newly established part of the city, previously a village outside of the city, with accelerated constructions, however, it became one of the new faces of so-called ‘change’ and ‘strong Turkey’¹⁵. This neighbourhood is also seen as a stronghold of support for the AKP and Erdoğan. In turn, Erdoğan has also declared his support to the neighbourhood on various occasions.¹⁶

My interview partner, Sermet, was a native of Başakşehir and proud to be a part of this neighbourhood. He stated that he was able to observe the changes there and was also involved in the political youth work of the AKP. He described himself during our talk as a ‘strong-willed person, who can resist other attractions’ meaning the temptations of a less religious lifestyle which he saw during his master studies abroad, or other political orientations¹⁷. Throughout the talk, I realised that he was stressing that he and I are coming from different backgrounds and he assessed my political, religious views by my appearance and offered his opinion in a kind manner: ‘I have four sisters, and all of them wear headscarves. I would not like it if one of them decides to unveil. It would indicate that the person lost her values. But it would be beautiful if you decided to wear a headscarf.’¹⁸

His assessment regarding my appearance was not only about my choice of using or not using religious clothing consciously, but also an insignificant (or at least insignificant to me) accessory

13 In order to protect the anonymity of my interview partners, I changed their names.

14 Note from my field journal, 27 April 2016.

15 In 2017, the AKP used the phrase “Strong Turkey with Yes (Evet ile Güçlü Türkiye)” for the 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum, which transformed the country’s political system from parliamentary to presidential. Please see the campaign video of the party: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpVkrGsuvAw>. For more information on the referendum, please see: Göğüş, Sezer İdil (2017): Referendum in Turkey: Open Debate is Essential for Societal Peace, Friedensakademie-Blog, 3.4.2017, in: <http://friedensakademie-blog.eu/2017/04/03/referendum-in-turkey-open-debate-is-essential-for-societal-peace/>.

16 Interestingly, the football team of the Başakşehir is known as “pro-government team” and also frequently called “team of the Sultan”. Indeed, Erdoğan has also openly declared his support for the team. For more detailed research about the neighbourhood and its transformation, please see: Cavdar, Ayse (2016): Building, Marketing and Living in an Islamic Gated Community: Novel Configurations of Class and Religion in Istanbul, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, vol. 40:3, pp. 507-523.

17 Interview with Sermet, 25 May 2016.

18 Interview with Sermet, 25 May 2016.

such as my glasses. So I wrote in my field journal: 'He somehow shows me my limits in this research. He wants to give me advice. He said that even my glasses give him a clue as to which political view I might support or from which part of the society I am from'. Towards the end of the meeting, he said that he would not send me to his other friends in the AKP youth organisations. His assumptions on my political view might have played a role in this decision. Accordingly, I felt that I was the one who was being observed, interviewed and assessed. In a way, the researcher becomes the research object.

Overall, I realised that such assessments about me are out of my control. Goffman argues that individuals assess others through their past experiences, and they put on a performance as if they are actors on a stage. They could or could not be aware of their performance, but through such performances, they will be assessed (Goffman 1959). In a similar vein, the researcher also put on a performance in front of her/his research subjects, and without noticing, she/he can be assessed as the 'other' or 'untrustworthy' beyond her/his intentions.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

There were various reasons why I could not continue to conduct my research in Turkey. Besides the political situation and security concerns during the first period of my field research, I faced several puzzles, which exposed, on the one hand, certain dilemmas regarding my positionality; and on the other, enabled me to analyse my limits, possibilities and my identity as a researcher. In turn, they formed my takes on self-reflexivity and helped to sharpen my thoughts on the ways of entering the field and acting therein.

Katherine Verdery discusses how there is a multiplication of researcher's identity during field research: '[...] we are all multiplied by those we meet, who create versions of us that might not much resemble our own versions' (Verdery 2018, 24). It is, therefore, a reciprocal identity creation (Verdery 2018, 23) between the researcher and the interlocutors, in which the positioning, the identity and/or the aim of the researcher might also be questioned and (de)/(re)constructed. In a similar vein, the aforementioned puzzling moments indicated different versions of me and different limits for my positionality: as a researcher; as a Turkish citizen; as a native; and as a foreigner. Indeed, one cannot certainly know how she/he would be perceived by the interlocutors. However, it is crucial for a researcher to pay attention to possible challenges or limits and be aware of her/his situatedness during the field research itself. Accordingly, this awareness about 'the relationship between the oneself and one's context' (Basberg Neumann and Neumann 2015, 799) can help to deal with any possible unexpected challenges rapidly.

Such fieldwork is often accompanied by a feeling of 'failure': whether access to the people can actually be accomplished; or whether a rapport can be built between the researcher and the interlocutors. However, I suggest that they do not demonstrate failure, but rather reveal the features (and also limits) for ethnographic knowledge claims, which should be analysed carefully by the researchers. Upon reflection on my own behaviour in the field, I would admit that I was astonished by these dilemmas regarding my positionality that I faced, overlooking my background as a Turkish citizen or my own development as a person and as a researcher. As such, I recommend the advice of Basberg Neumann & Neumann, who quote an old Greek aphorism *gnothi seauton*, know thyself: '[...] you need to know yourself, in order to understand what others are doing' (Basberg Neumann and Neumann 2015, 801). So self-reflexivity can help the researcher concordantly, and as Townsend-Bell states, 'reflexivity must be an incessant part of the research process at any stage' (Townsend-Bell 2009, 314).

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